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With the Indigenous, a more attractive anthropology

Com os indígenas, uma Antropologia mais atraente

Francisco Sarmiento



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With the indigenous, a more attractive Anthropology

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In recent years, members of many native peoples have enrolled in Brazilian universities after a long struggle and state changes concerning their right to assess specific policies. Previously limited, the indigenous presence on university campuses is drawing attention and posing questions about these students and how the courses they take will be handled in the future by the programs nation-wide covering a vast range of subjects, including anthropology. In terms of general historical and political issues, this process has been likened to the images the dominant society still holds of indigenous peoples, and the institutional structures into which they are admitted, notwithstanding regional variations and specific histories of interethnic contact. Coming from worlds transfigured by colonialism, and deeply aware of it, indigenous scholars seek to “indigenize” university spaces. While condemning the Western-promoted plunder and oppression, they compare it with their own knowledge. On the other hand, they appropriate anthropology’s tools with the political and intellectual purpose of debating and interacting with the surrounding non-indigenous world. Hence, the university becomes a proper setting for their cause, as it includes the public that may be interested in other ways of being in the world.

Aware of all this, Alcida Rita Ramos, in her text “Indigenous intellectuals embrace *anthropology*,” exposes this scenario in anthropology and hopes that, as fully-fledged members of the discipline, indigenous scholars will contribute to its renovation. In her proposal, this renewed field would become an *anthropological ecumene* where diverse forms of knowledge meet and interact, articulated and understood by a variety of indigenous and non-indigenous actors, “whose common denominator is the quest to understand oneself and others.” This would take anthropology beyond the notion that claims scientific openness yet continues to be Eurocentric by qualifying its own canons and epistemological framework as *science* while denying the same attribute to the knowledge of other cultures. Anthropology, then, would be intercultural and *anthropotopic* with no objects and subjects of investigation, or better, where *everyone* would be potentially the object or subject of investigation of everyone else, in a space inhabited by both indigenous and non-indigenous people, mutually interchanging their respective intellectual traditions and debating their differences and similarities. This may all appear utopian, but it is a challenge that appeals to indigenous people. It may not be real, but they can embrace it for its potential value!

Setting out from the author’s text, I wish to discuss some ideas that are closer to my own. From the outset, I should say that in this specific scenario, we notice a certain academic fear regarding the arrival of indigenous people into academic anthropology. There is a concern that they will confront the discipline, hence, its specific theories and research results, and that the discipline may lose quality, scientific rigor, and value.

However, we must remember that science renews itself only when its structures go through questioning, confusion, and revolution. In response to the issues raised in the text – which sounds like a provocation to Western anthropology structures and practitioners – we can say that these new players in the anthropological

game, rather than posing a threat, simply represent *other* possibilities to dialogue with the discipline's establishment and with its representatives. The issue of the quality of indigenous research can lead us to recognize indigenous inquiry and communication procedures and models, even when they mobilize their own epistemologies simultaneously with conventional techniques and theories as they see fit.

Clearly, some indigenous students come into the programs outraged with the role of anthropology as an instrument of Western investigation. After invading, massacring, plundering, and banning indigenous languages and cultures, it returns to the same subjugated societies to study what remains of them in its usual predatory mode. However, this is a rather short-sighted view of things, because the problem is not anthropology as such, but what it transmits, namely, the Eurocentrism that pre-exists the discipline itself. Nevertheless, as anthropology evolved, it became increasingly humanist and sufficiently sensitive to grasp the losses and violence committed against indigenous societies. Moreover, when these societies were on the verge of total extinction, anthropologists were some of the few who stood up for indigenous peoples, staking on their survival. If we say that anthropology is colonialist, we can also say that it is capable of self-reflection, self-renovation, and self-redemption when it values the realities of many different peoples. This is one reason why indigenous people have decided to embrace it.

Consequently, none of these indigenous scholars tried to take over anthropology to abolish its foundations. Among other things, they did not know these foundations, and it takes a while to learn about them. To the contrary, when indigenous students learn what school and academic life is all about, they regard it as interesting and, with its multiple contexts, potentially applicable to their own worlds. For this reason, as Alcida rightly observes, indigenous scholars are keen to learn the instruments of non-indigenous sciences. Most of them consider their training pragmatically as useful to their local realities or to broader political agendas. Others, dissatisfied with the images researchers have made of them, take upon themselves the task of challenging the academic status quo. Still others use anthropology to unveil the reasons and counter-reasons why Western societies treat indigenous peoples as they do. Finally, there are those who attempt to establish an indigenous anthropology based on the epistemologies of their own people.

To non-indigenous who resist indigenous anthropologists and to indigenous people who resist anthropology, we should say that the drive to know, including knowing the Other, is inherent to all societies. Indigenous traditions show that the ancestors theorized about interethnic relations and about other peoples, whether human or non-human. When the Europeans arrived, they also fell into those ancient notions. Therefore, academic anthropology may well be European in origin, but as it became democratized by dint of studying innumerable Others, it opened up a plethora of possibilities. Hence, we should not be alarmed about its future. Furthermore, anthropology shows that inner inquiries and debates, not just outwardly oriented, are possible, as studies of fields internal to Western society itself demonstrate. On the other hand, ethnographies and thoughts by indigenous scholars in Brazil about their own social groups reveal their viewpoints in brilliant and

enlightening forms. However, in no way do they discourage other anthropologists from carrying out current and new research among these same peoples, not to mention the work of indigenous anthropologists from other parts of the Americas and Oceania. In fact, it would be wonderful were these studies put together, thus enriching anthropology with different perspectives mutually shared. Going still further, indigenous scholars will probably engage in studies of their own interest and not be limited to auto-ethnography, ethnology, and indigenism. The problem is that history has been too cruel to indigenous societies to leave them aside right now, but no doubt, other directions for research will come up in the future.

One of the issues in the current debates is whether it is appropriate to call indigenous knowledge “science.” In these discussions, both indigenous and other scholars usually employ concepts such as “medicine,” “religion,” etc., when referring to indigenous societies. I would argue that one thing is to conceive the knowledge of other peoples, including indigenous peoples, as equivalent to the sophistication of Western knowledge, albeit based on their own histories and principles. It is another thing altogether to take them as identical, however similar they may be. In merging them into one single phenomenon, we lose sight of the most beautiful dimension these universes have, namely, their differences, which make things attractive. Either we explain native knowledge as science, but in their own terms (Western science has been unfolding for centuries), or we accept the differences in epistemology, and take into account all the manifestations that knowledge can yield.

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One thing that still causes bewilderment is the sight of indigenous students circulating in the academic milieu of a society inclined to rank and distinguish levels of knowledge. However, anthropology is open to issues of interest to all societies. Thus, I deem very positive the effort anthropologists make to change the limited and outmoded endemic view about indigenous peoples and seek new perspectives to construct an anthropology based on discussions that include indigenous and non-indigenous scholars on equal terms. Anthropologists are among the few who try to understand indigenous realities, histories and perspectives, especially those who question their own society.

Anthropology faces new challenges to find a way toward what would be, in Alcida's terms, an *ecumenical* space. Among these challenges is the need to improve the system of enrolment for indigenous students in anthropological institutes and departments. We need to break the prevailing resistance by eliminating the hierarchical treatment dispensed to non-White and non-Western people by promoting policies that help them cope with gaps in education, as well as providing resources, space, and means to carry out and disseminate their research.

On the other hand, indigenous students who opt for anthropology also face their own challenges. They are required to be familiar with the discipline's fundamentals and principles, and know well the background of Western culture, from which anthropology originates, understand how the discipline has evolved and perceived other peoples. This means that, in order to know one's own society better, one needs to know about as many other societies as possible. Similarly,

to have more access to information, procedures, and communication, one must learn other languages. Furthermore, to appropriate anthropology as a tool and putting together collections of texts or translating histories and traditions is not enough. We must participate in debates, make propositions and express thoughts about a world or the encounter of worlds. Besides, we should go beyond the current discussions in anthropology, such as ideas about nature and culture. This is a fundamental issue to be tackled by indigenous thinkers, responsible as it is for many of the problems troubling the discipline and Western cosmology.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, we are a potential world. The *baserã*, experts of the *ye'pâ-masa* people, conceive things as transformed through *u'uró*, the sound/power of thought that follows the paths/rivers of knowledge. We have a journey ahead of us! If everything is handled with care and intelligence, indigenous people will have a great role to play in anthropology. Then, anthropology will not be the same, it will become indigenized and thereby more diverse and attractive.

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